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However, before the year was out, this church was already collapsing. The believers came from all over the city and had little in common. We wanted them to become like a family, but they were not interested. If Tim was gone on a trip, no one came.

Gathering a contextualized group of believers was our attempt to plant a church that would last by applying insights from the past. For at least 60 years, missionaries had been winning individuals to Christ in this country. But they had been returning to Islam to regain the families and communities they had lost. So, in the last 20 years, missionaries began gathering them together in hopes of creating community, but the churches thus planted did not last. Thinking the churches were too foreign, which made the families and government oppose them, we were now trying to contextualize the fellowships, but they too were falling apart.

We gave up and started over. Perhaps we were gathering people from too many different backgrounds together. This time, we determined to gather only believers from one people group – the one we were focusing on. So when the opportunity arose, we introduced the only two known believers from that tribe. We expected them to embrace with joy. Instead, they backed away with suspicion.

Later, each one reprimanded Tim for introducing them. Each feared the other would expose him as a Christian to his hometown or to the government. Now we thought, “Church planting is so hard!” Our contextualized, multi-cultural fellowship had failed. Our contextualized, mono-cultural group had also failed. How were we ever going to get believers to trust each other enough to plant a church?

As it turns out, we needed to re-evaluate our assumptions about what the church is, and how one is started. First, God unexpectedly showed us a completely different way to plant churches. Then, we noticed how Jesus planted a church cross-culturally and how He instructed the disciples to start a church.

God showed us a different way

God overhauled our concept of church by planting a church Himself within our people group. To be accurate, He didn't really plant a church; He planted the Gospel into a community that already existed. Struggling with our failure to plant a church, we received an entirely unexpected letter. The handcarried letter notified us that two brothers from our people group had finished a Bible correspondence course. They now wanted to meet a believer. We promptly sent off our best Arabic speaker to their distant town. When he arrived at their house, it was packed. Our team member wondered if he had stumbled onto a wedding, so he hesitantly asked for Hassan, who had written the letter.

Hassan and his brother rushed forward to welcome him into their household. They had gathered all their relatives and close friends to hear their honored guest explain what they had learned in their course. They eagerly received the gospel and pledged as a group to follow Jesus. Our teammate was thrilled. When he returned home, we shared his amazement.

This new church, consisting of an extended family and friends, continues strong to this day. Decades later, they are still spreading the Gospel from town to town through their natural networks. They study the Word together, pray, baptize, and fellowship in ways they have determined best fit their community. No outsiders have ever tried to contextualize what has taken place. They have never had a leader or funding from outside their relational network. They do not feel any need for them.

“Is this church planting?” we asked. It was so different than what we had been doing. For decades, faithful workers had been forming churches, only to have them collapse in one to ten years. When we arrived, there was only one fellowship left, struggling along in the largest city. We ourselves had witnessed the genesis and demise of several more groups. Was there another way? We compared the two ways of church planting. Our way consisted of forming a church by gathering together believers we knew. Their faith preceded their commitments to each other. We were the connecting center of the relationships, whether the church was contextualized or not, multi-cultural or monocultural.

Of course, we hoped to turn leadership over to the believers as their commitments to each other grew. Instead, the churches collapsed. The way we were building community was a pattern common within our own culture but not theirs. But a church developed in a different way when the Gospel was planted into Hassan's family. The believers encouraged each other within their

natural community. Their commitments to each other preceded their faith. Members could no more easily leave the church than they could leave their family. We provided occasional Biblical input, such as translated Scriptures, but little else. We were truly outsiders.

Could faith growing within a family or network be a more effective way of establishing churches within communal societies? If so, how could we do this as outsiders? As we looked at the Scriptures, we noticed two things for the first time: Jesus had planted a church cross-culturally within a Samaritan village, and He had given His disciples instructions on how to plant the Gospel within communities.

Jesus taught us a different way

“How do we plant a church this other way?” we wondered. We began by looking at the way Jesus planted a church in a Samaritan community (John 4). The Samaritans, like Muslims today, worshiped the God of Abraham. Like the Samaritans, the Muslims “worship what they do not know.” Because of their emphasis on purity, the Jews considered the Samaritans defiled and excluded them from the temple and all regular worship of God. So, the Samaritan woman was shocked when Jesus asked her for a cup of water, because of the longstanding enmity between their people groups. And when Jesus offered her eternal life, she turned it down, because she knew her people could never join the Jewish religion. “Interesting,” we thought.

Our Muslim friends often turned down salvation in Jesus because they could not imagine joining the Christian religion. But Jesus removed that barrier. When the Samaritan woman pointed out that Jews worshiped in the temple, but Samaritans on the mountain, Jesus clarified that changing religious forms was not the issue. Instead, he said, “A time is coming and has now come when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks,” (John 4:23). The woman was so overjoyed that they too could become true worshipers, she ran back and told her whole village.

As a result, the Samaritans invited Jesus to come into their community for two days. Jesus persuaded them that He “really is the Savior of the world,” not just the Savior of the Jews. Many believed, and Jesus left behind a church inside that community, like the one in Hassan’s family. Jesus did not try to get them to come out of their community to join with Jewish or Samaritan believers from elsewhere. We had never noticed this part of the story before!

This story was not a parable; Jesus faced the same barriers we were facing! All the Muslims we knew had been taught that to worship God through Christ they would have to leave their family and join the Christian group, who had been their enemies for 1400 years. But somehow Hassan and his family had seen things the way Jesus did: They could become true worshipers without leaving their community. Then we saw, for the first time, that Jesus had also taught the disciples how to plant a church within a community. In Luke 10, he told seventy disciples to look for a “man of peace” – someone who would invite them into his own household. They were to remain in that household sharing the Gospel with all who came into that home, and not go from house to house. If no one in a particular village invited them into their household, they were told to leave and go on to another village. Amazingly clear!

We had never thought of looking for people who would invite us into their family or community to talk about Jesus! But Jesus and the disciples had planted churches this way. “We can copy what Jesus did!” we realized. We can begin by telling our Muslim friends that worshiping God in spirit and truth does not require them to change religious systems. If some receive this news with joy and invite us back to tell their whole family, we can go into their community. As happened in Hassan’s family, those who decide to follow Jesus can grow in faith together. Instead of trying to get believers from different communities to form a lasting new group, we could, like Jesus, establish a church inside their natural community.

Conclusion

After 15 years, we had learned the hard way that – in communal cultures—we couldn’t plant a lasting church by gathering random believers into new groups. It didn’t matter if they were contextualized or not, multi-cultural or mono-cultural, after a few months or years, these groups would fall apart. Instead we needed to find a person of peace who would invite us into their own community to share the Gospel. Jesus was welcomed into the Samaritan village. The 70 disciples were welcomed into a home. In the same way, Peter was welcomed into Cornelius’ household, and Paul was welcomed by Lydia into her household. In each case, they were welcomed into a cohesive community, so the Gospel was shared with the whole group. As a result, people already committed to each other came to faith together. A church was born within a natural community, without creating a new group just for fellowship. It reminded us of something Ralph Winter had said, “The ‘church’ (i.e. committed community) is already there, they just don’t know Jesus yet!”

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<http://www.missionfrontiers.org/pdf/2009/01/16-18%20Planting%20Churches.pdf>